

June 27, 2007

Contact: Robin Winchell (202) 225-4031

**WASHINGTON, D.C.** - U.S. Rep. Charlie Melancon (D-LA) today joined Rural Health Care Coalition co-chairs Congressmen Greg Walden (R-OR) and Earl Pomeroy (D-ND) in unveiling the bipartisan Health Care Access and Rural Equity Act of 2007.

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Melancon is co-sponsoring the bill, which is a comprehensive piece of legislation making several improvements to help rural healthcare providers address the challenges associated with delivering quality healthcare close to home.

**"Rural communities are struggling to provide accessible and affordable health care,"** said Rep. Melancon.

**"Living in my small town of Napoleonville in Assumption Parish, my family and I understand from firsthand experience the challenges that people in rural communities face with regards to health care. Hospitals are few and far between, and people who are disabled, or are extremely sick, or lack reliable transportation have trouble getting to see a doctor. Under-funded hospitals struggle to afford new, up-to-date equipment and technology. Independent pharmacies suffer because Medicare takes too long to reimburse them. Clinics and hospitals face a severe shortage of healthcare providers because they often can't afford to pay doctors and nurses competitive wages."**

Rep. Melancon continued, **"The H-CARE Act would address some of these health care challenges rural communities face, and I will continue working with the Rural Health Care Coalition to pass this bill in Congress."**

The H-CARE Act, which has bipartisan support, will do the following:

- Increase payments known as disproportionate share hospital (DSH) payments to rural hospitals with a disproportionate share of Medicare and Medicaid patients.
- Improve payments for lab services in small Critical Access Hospitals.
- Ensure adequate rural representation on the Medicare Payment Advisory Commission.
- Improve payments for rural ground ambulance services.
- Raise Rural Health Clinic reimbursements to more appropriately cover costs.
- Authorize health information technology grants for rural practitioners.
- Establish a Rural Health Quality Advisory Commission and rural health quality demonstration projects.
- Require prompt payment to rural pharmacies by Medicare prescription drug plans.
- Reauthorize the Rural Outreach and Network Grants.
- Extend several expiring Medicare adjustment payments for rural practitioners including physicians practicing in physician scarcity areas, rural ambulance providers, rural home health agencies and specific classes of rural hospitals .

To date, twelve national organizations have endorsed the H-CARE Act including the National Rural Health Association, American Hospital Association, Rural Referral Center/Sole Community Hospital Coalition, American Counseling Association, American Association for Marriage and Family Therapists, American Ambulance Association, American Osteopathic Association, National Association of Rural Health Clinics, Federation of American Hospitals, College of American Pathologists, Section 508 Hospital Coalition and the American Mental

Health Counselors Association.

**"In rural Louisiana, access to affordable, quality healthcare can be a matter of life or death," said Melancon. "The H-CARE Act goes a long way toward improving healthcare access and I will continue fighting for this bill's passage. Rural Americans are depending on it."**

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